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AUTHOR Wilson, Harriett
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ABSTRACT

This brief note, prepared for the 1979 International Congress on Children in the Fourth World (UNESCO), discusses effects of poverty on children. It is suggested that inadequate incomes prevent attainment of culturally prescribed levels of social experience or performance. Families subjected to long-term poverty tend to develop adaptive patterns of living in stressful circumstances. Parental activities among the poor are influenced by greater family size, overcrowded housing conditions, and high population density in deprived urban areas. Methods of parenting are adapted to these constraints. The value orientation of poor children is shaped on a collective basis. Mothering is usually delegated to older children when the young are at play in streets and yards. These parenting methods are detrimental to the development of the child's language and sense of personal importance. The absence of privacy and limitation of space prevent the development of creative activities, manipulative skills, and concentration. The need for nursery experiences and for compensatory school programs for disadvantaged children is no longer questioned. However, the effects of special programs tend to fade as the children get older, especially among children whose home circumstances remain poor. Preschool nursery provisions should be made available to all disadvantaged children for their intrinsic rather than instrumental value. (Author/RH)

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THE HIDDEN INJURIES OF POVERTY

A note on cultural aspects*

The International Congress on Children of the Fourth World is concerned with the fate of millions of children who are condemned to a life of non-participation in their own society. This note attempts to outline some of the social realities surrounding these children, and to suggest a conceptual framework which might serve as a point of departure in developing a strategy to combat poverty, exclusion and blighted lives.

Two background features are particularly relevant in a stock-taking exercise, even though the future may be very different from what might be expected by a simple extrapolation of current trends. First, the continuing process of industrialisation and urbanisation is accompanied by a trend towards greater centralisation and bureaucratisation of politics, commerce, culture and communications, and a trend for the transformation of national economies into a small number of transnational economic groupings. This is accompanied by greater concentrations of wealth both within nations and between nations, so that the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow. The second feature concerns the lives of poor children more immediately. The new technology is making rapid advances at a time of stagnant production and high unemployment, and although it is believed that ultimately microchips will generate job opportunities, it is widely predicted that in the immediate future there will be further job losses hitting the non-skilled sector particularly hard, especially in highly industrialised societies. These trends will have to be taken into account as given factors which, in a discussion of

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poverty groups, will need special attention in terms of policies to counteract the effects they have on the lives of poor people.

The main point of this note concerns the inequality of life chances experienced by persons or families in marginal positions in society, and adaptational patterns of living which are developed in an endeavour to cope with adverse circumstances. The root of their problem lies in inadequate incomes which prevent the attainment of culturally prescribed levels of social experience or performance. The families who are most at risk belong typically to the low-paid, largely non-skilled sector of the working classes. They do not have the advantages of stable earnings, an incremental wages structure, security of employment, or chances of career advancement. On the contrary, life chances of this sector of the population are determined by very limited job opportunities and by a significantly greater risk of unemployment, sickness, or disability than the rest of the population. The position of the non-skilled worker in the labour market results in a vicious circle of underprivilege. The 'dual labour market' is a rapidly developing feature of industrialised societies; there is a 'primary market' catering for skilled workers and for others capable of negotiating long-term contracts collectively, and a 'secondary market' catering for those who are unable to enter the 'primary market'. The inability to acquire a secure income prevents the formation of assets. In terms of class the poor are at the lowest end of the social hierarchy. In terms of social status they are held in low esteem by others.

Families subjected to long-term poverty tend to develop adaptive patterns of living in stressful circumstances. In trying to give an account of typical methods of child-rearing three factors must be emphasised which have a bearing on parental activities: the non-skilled sector of the working classes tends to have larger families than the

skilled sector or the non-manual classes; housing needs are rarely fully met resulting in overcrowdedness; and the density of population in deprived urban areas tends to be high. Consequently, methods of parenting have to be adapted to the constraints arising from these factors. Where there are many children in the family and the mother has no domestic help, it is practically impossible to treat each child as an individual. The value orientation of the children is shaped on a collective basis. Children are seen by their parents in terms of their usefulness in family life, and a child's personal desires and intentions are discouraged. Punishment is often administered indiscriminately to curb noise or conflict without regard for individual wrong-doers. Money and other possessions, often also clothing, are shared out irrespective of age-related needs, with the exception of the head of the family whose needs are usually met first. The operative unit is not the individual but the family, the objective is survival. The status of children is not unlike that of children in subsistence-cultures that require group action for survival, where adults tend to evaluate children not in terms of individual development but in relation to the group.

Overcrowdedness in the home leads to play in streets and yards with neighbours' children. If parents wish to keep good relationships with neighbours they cannot afford to select play companions for their children, as more affluent parents tend to do who occupy more spacious homes and private gardens. Mothering is usually delegated to older children when out at play. Children of all ages are encouraged to stand on their own feet and to 'defend themselves', because parents do not like to intervene in their children's quarrels when other people's children are involved; it may lead to quarrels with neighbours. In densely populated neighbourhoods it is more important to keep peace with other families than to intervene in children's fights and arguments.

The consequences of these adaptational parenting methods are detrimental to child development. A collective, rather than an individual value orientation impedes the development of a child's sense of personal importance, and he will be less likely to set himself apart from others and from the physical world; he will place little trust in his own powers. The early severance of mother-child contacts and the delegation of mothering to older children affects the young child's language development. Play in unsupervised street play groups encourages aggressiveness and other more subtle forms of bullying. There is no training in age-appropriate social behaviour. The absence of privacy and space to allow relaxed intensive play prevents the development of creative activities, of manipulative skills, and the ability to concentrate.

These living conditions aggravate the situation of children who anyway suffer from scarcity or total absence of toys and equipment suitable for play. In addition, parents who cannot afford to develop their own interests and hobbies, and who are unable to take their children on family outings into the country or to places of cultural interest, thus involuntarily deprive their children of many enriching social experiences. Many behavioural competencies, useful in school and in society at large, cannot be developed.

When at school these children are usually quite incompetent. They do not know what being in school is about, --not merely learning to read but getting on with the job, not requiring much supervision, being reliable, being able to organise oneself, in short, behaving in an educationally motivated way. What is here described as a lack of competence may be seen by the teacher as 'laziness' or as 'troublesomeness'; the child gives up easily, can never stick at anything, has no persistence, and cannot be relied on. It is impossible for the teacher to avoid giving very disadvantaged children a feeling that they are somehow 'lesser citizens', as if they are to blame for their failure. This process of reinforcement of the handicaps inflicted

by poverty is not usually deliberate, it just happens. These children do not profit from what is offered in the schools, and thus the educational system reinforces the inequalities that exist in society.

The need for nursery experience and for compensatory school programs for disadvantaged children is no longer questioned, and there are strong reasons why these provisions should also include support in the areas of health and welfare. Nevertheless, the hope that nursery and early school programs which are designed to reduce the handicaps of deprivation would have a deep and lasting effect, has not been confirmed. Taking all evidence now available from British and American studies, it appears that the effects of special programs tend to fade out as the children get older, especially among children whose home circumstances remain poor. The effects of poverty on child-development are too deep-seated to be overcome by compensatory programs. This should not reflect on the value of them; especially pre-school nursery provisions should be made available to all disadvantaged children for their intrinsic rather than instrumental value.

The hidden injuries of poverty are not easy to grasp, and they are perhaps only fully understood by those who have experienced them. The experience of poverty in the life of a child contains many elements. Poor children go short of things which are considered normal or essential by those around them; they have to learn to live with others who criticise their parents as inadequate; they have to cope with much stress and sorrow in their homes. They learn, in growing, to come to terms with and to contain the situations of stress to which they are subjected day by day. The children's capacity to internalise what they experience enables them to accept as normal a situation that, by any standards other than their own, would be considered extraordinary or tragic. It has been suggested by Oscar Lewis that the "culture of poverty", however much it may deviate from normal standards, has variety and richness within its own limitations. We cannot accept this misapplication of the

concept of culture to ways of living which are not cherished or held up as models of the desired life by those who are subjected to them. The patterns of child-rearing described in this paper are best seen as adaptations to particular situations of deprivation and constraints of the environment by families who find themselves in difficult circumstances not of their own choosing. They hate the situation but try to make the best of it as long as personality resources will allow, but hopelessness and powerlessness are dominant feelings which unavoidably are passed on to their children. If these children are to be helped to become participating members of society, then our first task must be to alleviate the stresses caused by poverty by a massive reallocation of resources to the poor.

Harriett Wilson

(This note is based on the findings of an empirical study which has been published under the title of PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN THE INNER CITY, by Harriett Wilson and G.W. Herbert, with a contribution on incomes by John Veit Wilson. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).